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Julius Caesar: Shakespeare's Africa Play?

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Theatre Reviews

***The Tempest*. Dir. Silviu Purcărete. The National Theatre “Marin Sorescu” of Craiova, Romania. 16th Shakespeare Festival, Gdańsk, Poland.**

Reviewed by **Olga Bogdańska**

Widely regarded as one of the most important and creative Romanian directors, Silviu Purcărete (1950) chose William Shakespeare’s *Tempest* to provide a new insight into the story of ousted Duke of Milan Prospero, his daughter Miranda, “demi-devil” Caliban, Prince Ferdinand and magical spirit Ariel. The play, which was staged in August 2012 as part of the 16th Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk,¹ became a bitter lesson focused on the intellectual world of today.

What could the Polish audience find in *The Tempest* seen through the eyes of visionary theatre maker Purcărete? Many of the must-have elements of *The Tempest* were there, such as the storm, the shipwrecked men, and magic. However, there is nothing better than a play with a great twist. While watching the performance on August 4th, I came to the conclusion that anything could happen. Purcărete created an illusory ‘tempest’ for the audience by putting them in a state of confusion from the beginning through to the end.

As in fantasy, nothing was as it should be. The mere representation of the usual dimension of man and woman became blurred. Prince Ferdinand was played by an actress (Romanița Ionescu) while Miranda was played by an actor (Sorin Leoveanu). In addition to Miranda, the same actor played the part of Caliban. The story, however, revealed that these two characters merged into one person. This created a completely new perspective on the relationship between Prospero, Miranda and Caliban, providing an element of confusion, surprise, intrigue and drama.

Various comic touches reminded the audience that the play was supposed to be a comedy. For example, Ariel was not presented as an average

¹ The Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk (Poland) is an annual theatre event held during the summer, in the last week of July/first week of August. The organizers are the Theatrum Gedanense Foundation and the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre. In 2012 the 16th Shakespeare Festival took place between July 27th and August 5th.

magical, airy spirit. Purcărete's version of Ariel wore blue paint on his face, a clown's red nose and white stockings. Part of the shipwrecked crew, Stephano and Trinculo were confusingly similar to the famous comic duo Laurel and Hardy, while Antonio and his entourage appeared with their hair shot up as if they were accidentally struck by lightning. Finally, the director broke the Shakespearean archetype of the perfect Prospero. When Prospero appeared at the end of the play, he was not the typical irresistible magician, but a mere conjurer.

This spectacle might be summarized in a famous quote by the Bard of Avon: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.207-208).² Indeed, Purcărete used Shakespeare as a foundation and then defined his own mesmerizing territory. In my opinion, this rendition of a classical text involves a trope of failure that has been a habitual feature of the contemporary intellectual world. Prospero, who derives his entire knowledge of life from literature, appears to be slightly bizarre, perhaps even insane. After being exiled from his kingdom, he has lost touch with reality and now lives in a world of fantasy. In my view Purcărete stands on a position which is close to that of the Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu, regarding the fact that since the fall of communism the era of intellectuals has come to an end. Certainly, the analogy seems to be apt, as they both present the portrait of a society where intellectual elite is mourning the loss of the importance and privileges they once had.

Nevertheless, Purcărete's Prospero struggles to prove that he still possesses the capacity to influence others. He desperately attempts to humanize "monster" Caliban, transforming him into his daughter Miranda. However, his effort goes in vain. During the successive scenes the dramatic transformation occurs, and Miranda's paper dress is torn into pieces as Prospero succeeds in creating a living creature, but not a human being. Sadly, Purcărete leaves us with no illusions; Prospero's power and authority are deceptive.

Purcărete's Prospero might be considered as an enlightened philosopher who seems to be caught in a trap. The impressive set design by Dragoș Buhagiar played a major role in shaping scenic movement and creating the mood of the production. The acting area of the stage was limited to just one chamber that seemed to be part of an abandoned palace. Prospero's fabled island was replaced by an old, dark and dirty room with paint peeling off the walls and run-down furniture; there were plenty of books and paper everywhere, and the force of the raging storm outside the palace spread pieces of cardboard in the interior. The use of flimsy materials reminded the spectators that they were engaged in a fragile and impermanent world.

There was one road to this paper-thin reality of Prospero, which led through an ancient wardrobe. Associations with the fairyland of Narnia

² The quote follows the compact edition of the Oxford Complete Works.

reinforced the impression that we were in the middle of an imaginary world. Additionally, characters that appeared in the beginning and at the end of the play looked like living dolls, with porcelain skin and dressed up in costumes alluding to early eighteenth-century clothing. This image, accompanied by the opera music resounding around, evoked for many a vision of splendor and magnificence of the Age of Enlightenment. On the other hand, in this rather grotesque appearance we could actually discern a brilliant disguise.

Purcărete's reflection on the twilight of intellectuals was strongly manifested in the final scene, where Prospero appeared in a dramatic farewell soliloquy in which he pardoned his enemies, subsequently falling unconscious among piles of paper. When the other characters arrived, they could only hear the lonely voice of an old man, like an echo, a memory of golden times. Contrary to Shakespeare's version, there was no scene where the two brothers met. The visual message was simple, yet moving and inspiring at the same time. The play ended without the great Shakespearean epilogue when it came to reconciliation.

This project was produced by The National Theatre "Marin Sorescu" of Craiova. The actors involved, inter alios, eminent Ilie Gheorghe (Prospero), Valentin Mihali (Ariel), Romanița Ionescu (Ferdinand) and George Albert Costea (Antonio). The exquisite cast was the greatest asset of Purcărete's production. *The Tempest* is not an easy play, but the on-stage chemistry among the cast members surely helped to make the complicated tale easy to follow. Although all actors portrayed their respective characters incredibly soundly, one was truly a jewel in the tiara of this performance. Sorin Leoveanu, who played the dual role of Miranda and Caliban, was a true wizard, who took the audience to the world of the human psyche, full of fascinating twists and turns. His charismatic presence easily engaged the audience before they had even taken their seats.

While Shakespeare's plays may be an effective lens to express contemporary angst, recently there seems to be a growing tendency to give them a more fashionable style. In a worst-case scenario, there is more Hollywood than Shakespeare. All the more, theatre aficionados and novices alike certainly gained a deeper appreciation of the Romanian performance. Whether by accident or design, Purcărete's version succeeded with brilliant simplicity and breathtaking aesthetics. It appeared that the audience appreciated the difficulty and beauty of the spectacle giving the cast a long and heartfelt standing ovation. As Mark Twain once said, "public is the only critic whose opinion is worth anything at all".



1. Ilie Gheorghe as Prospero. (Photograph by Greg Goodale.)



2. Ilie Gheorghe as Prospero and Sorin Leoveanu as Miranda/Caliban.
(Photograph by Ken Reynolds.)

***Richard III*. Dir. Gabriel Villela. Blanes Museum Garden, Montevideo, Uruguay.**

Reviewed by *Verónica D'Auria*

**Shakespeare's Clowns:
An irreverent and magical Brazilian version of *Richard III***

The choice of *Richard III* by the company who call themselves "Shakespeare's Clowns" and the Brazilian director Gabriel Villela had to meet several challenges. In the first place there are 52 characters in the tragedy (there is a self-referential joke about this fact) played by only 8 actors. Secondly, the artists had to be very resourceful since they had to combine clowning with serious or tragic acting as well as sing and play several musical instruments at the same time. The performance in Uruguay, which was part of the celebrations of "Montevideo Latin-American Capital of Culture 2013", was given in Spanish, which implied an extra effort for the director and the cast. This company of itinerant players included many typical funeral songs from the Northeast of Brazil (called "incelenÇas") and rock classics as part of their repertoire, setting the melancholy or dramatic tone of most of the scenes.

From the beginning Richard was portrayed as a hog, with a pig's mask which he later removed, making obscene gestures and grunting. The scene of the seduction of Lady Anne (a male actor with two balloons used as breasts) was entirely comical and irreverent, with a rather heavy and lascivious Gloucester carrying an umbrella in a sequence that seemed to be stripped out of its dramatic grandeur and fit for popular or street theatre. Most secondary characters were played by the same actors, who removed wigs or put on top hats onstage, but the impossibility of following all the details of the plot did not prevent its understanding.

Some minor parts, such as the murderers' or Tyrrell's, took on greater importance as their own role and their greed –regardless of Richard's cruelty or ambition– are also of paramount importance. Tyrrell (who also played the Duchess of York in an unbecoming red evening gown) was characterized by his moustache (which he kept while playing the Duchess, a feature that was commented jokingly during the play) and his mirrored aviator glasses, a trait immediately recognizable by a Latin-American audience as distinctive of the repressors of their former dictatorships. Mounted on a hobby-horse, his murders took place onstage, accompanied by Richard playing the accordion and singing "I killed a man/ and what did my father do?/ my father killed two".

Buffoonery and comic relief left aside, Margaret's curse acquired a really sombre dimension, echoing the Greek tragic figures of prophets and

soothsayers. Indeed hers is deservedly a major role since at their death hour all the wronged characters recollect her words, having been foretold of their destruction by the widow of Henry VI. Another serious aspect that was emphasized in this production was the unfathomable nature of the subconscious mind. Clarence used a baby-faced puppet to narrate his dream which is not only premonitory but full of surreal beauty, and so is Richard's nightmare before the final battle.

The properties and lighting were very significant in this production. In the garden of the Blanes Museum, where the play was put on, an ancient tree was lit with a bright crimson light against which the colourful clowns were contrasted, with their elaborate and oriental-like facial paint. The female characters loomed above Richard and other plotters and schemers, standing on several raised platforms with canopies, wailing for the loss of their babes (Elizabeth), putting curses on their enemies (Margaret) or cursing their own abortive son (Duchess of York).

Although the text was closely based on Shakespeare's, digressions seemed like improvisations, and self-referential lines abounded (these being characteristic of street theatre and carnival spectacles in Latin America). Amongst them was yet another (topical) curse by the Duchess that Richard's body will be found lying beneath a car park and that images of his remains will be uploaded in Facebook.

The production did not end with Richmond (who wore a peasant's hat) restoring order and bringing an end to the War of the Roses. Behind the defeated boar who grunted heavily until he died, women archers pointed their arrows towards heaven. A last "incelença" with a beautiful ensemble of male and female voices closed the scene and brought the dramatic moment to its climax.



Richard III. (Photograph by Pablo Pinheiro.)

***Henry V.* Dir. Des McAnuff. Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Ontario, Canada.**

***Julius Caesar.* Dir. Gregory Doran. Royal Shakespeare Company.**

Reviewed by **Coen Heijes**

***Henry V* and the Canadian context**

Since its start in 1953 in a big canvas tent –with a production of *Richard III* featuring Alec Guinness–, the little town of Stratford, Ontario (Canada) has grown to be home to the largest classical theatre company in North America. Situated on the river Avon –named after its famous British counterpart–, this Canadian town of approximately 30,000 inhabitants –about the same size as Stratford-upon-Avon– started a tradition of a theatre festival dedicated to the works of Shakespeare. Under the driving force of Stratford-born journalist Tom Patterson and the first artistic director –the famous British actor Tyrone Guthrie– work was begun on a thrust stage theatre inside the canvas tent by theatre designer Tanya Moisewitsch. The thrust stage in Stratford was revolutionary at the time and provided inspiration for many venues around the world –including the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in New York, the Chichester Festival Theatre and the Sheffield Crucible Theatre in England, and the Olivier Theatre at the National Theatre in London. The Stratford Shakespeare Festival – running from April to November– has meanwhile grown to be a festival which draws more than 500,000 visitors every year in four different theatres. Although the plays of William Shakespeare form the origin and core of the repertoire, the Stratford Festival also hosts operetta and musical theatre, works by contemporary playwrights, and productions of older, renowned playwrights, such as the ancient Greeks, Molière, Racine, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, and Tennessee Williams. In the summer of 2012, the American-Canadian director Des McAnuff directed his last play as artistic director of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, *Henry V*. At Stratford he produced more than 80 plays and directed 12 of them over a period of 6 years, and the last production in Stratford of this highly decorated artistic director –he was awarded a Laurence Olivier Award, two Tony Awards, and the Order of Canada– was much looked forward to. For McAnuff himself too, *Henry V* was a play which he had wanted to direct for some thirty years – ever since he had started his Shakespearean career with a production of *Henry IV.1*, when the original plan to do the whole tetralogy fell through.

Now, *Henry V* is a play which elicits mixed interpretations from critics. On the one hand it is considered jingoistic: in fact it is rarely performed outside

of the U.K. and it was not staged in France, for example, until 1999. This patriotic interpretation had roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the 1944 film starring Laurence Olivier built on this interpretation with an ideal warrior-king triumphant over foreign enemies. On the other hand, more recent interpretations have shown *Henry V* to be a play about a ruthless, Machiavellian king fighting a vicious and unjust war. Anti-war sentiments after World War II have resulted in productions following this interpretation and in 1977 Norman Rabkin (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 28.3: 279-96) described the play through the metaphor of a black and white trick picture which can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck. Productions of *Henry V* have tended to choose one of these interpretations and Rabkin argued that no compromise was possible between the two: One saw either the rabbit in the trick drawing or the duck. More recently, productions have attempted to veer away from this dichotomy and bring out the ambivalence of the play, as in the latest *Henry V* in Michael Boyd's RSC *History Cycle* (2007/2008). Although *Henry V* is rarely performed outside the U.K., Canada is an exception to the rule, with no less than 6 productions –including the latest by McAnuff– at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Previous Stratford productions of *Henry V* have generally tended to gloss over the more ruthless or vicious elements in the king: most productions, for example, have either completely cut Henry V's infamous order to kill all the prisoners, or have moved it to a place where his order was seemingly caused by the French killing of the English boys. In the programme notes, however, McAnuff stated that he wanted to move away from a one-sided approach and serve up a complex and ambivalent portrait of an unsettling king, who was alternately admirable and ruthless. In the director's notes in the programme he stated, for example, that, right at the start of the play, Shakespeare left open the question whether Henry V was sincere in adopting the legal opinion of the Church that there was a legitimate basis for invading France.

Onstage, however, this matter did not always materialize that way, as I will demonstrate in some pivotal scenes. The ambivalence, which might surround Henry's sincerity in invading France, was absent from this production. Henry's movements were brisk as he listened to the arguments of the churchmen, whose validation of invading France was revealed to be flimsy and non-existent as they produced one huge book after another in an endless row to explain the Salic Law. The Archbishop's line "So that, as clear as is the summer's sun" (1.2.86)³ –after the argument– was greeted with a round of laughter from the audience. In this context, Henry's question whether he could "with right and conscience make this claim" (1.2.96) could hardly be sincere. As the Archbishop answered "The sin upon my head, dread sovereign" (1.2.97), a

³ The quotes follow the compact edition of the Oxford Complete Works.

group of about twenty actors, all dressed in black and standing in the open space between the first row of seats and the thrust stage, stood up and chanted the words “God and his angels guard your sacred throne, / And make you long become it” (1.2.7-8) –in a re-arrangement of these lines. The discrepancy between the holy words, chanted solemnly, and the obvious manipulation going on, also removed any question as to Henry V’s sincerity that McAnuff seemed to be aiming for in this scene, according to the director’s notes.

In scene 2.2 –where we see the condemnation of the three English traitors– the ruthlessness of this king was visually revealed as the three traitors were actually executed onstage –for which there is no legitimation in the text, which has as stage direction: “Exeunt” [the traitors, guarded]. Black-dressed men laid down the prisoners, raised their swords and let them fall as the lights blacked out and the line “No king of England, if not king of France” (2.2.190) was spoken. It is highly unusual in *Henry V* productions to have the traitors killed onstage and it highlighted the ruthless consequences of Henry’s actions, although there seemed to be one brief moment when Henry V revealed some mixed emotions: as he spoke the line “I will weep for thee” (2.2.137), he briefly touched the head of the traitor Scrooge –one of his best friends. However, in the grimness of the scene, one was left to wonder at any sincerity or deep-felt emotion, which was further strengthened by the contrast with the following scene (2.3). In this scene, Falstaff’s friends mourned his passing: they all showed strong emotions at the death of a friend –in contrast to Henry’s reaction–, and romantic and melancholy music was allowed to underscore the sense of sadness and loss in this scene.

The ultimatum at the gates of Harfleur was the scene in which this production came closest to ambivalence. First, Henry coolly described horrors awaiting the citizens if they would not surrender their town –an ultimatum that this Henry would carry out. However, after the citizens yielded their city, Henry fell down and kissed the ceremonial gown of the Governor of Harfleur as if thanking him for preventing the otherwise inevitable horrors. Henry’s next kiss occurred during the scene in which Bardolph was condemned. Once again, the scene was staged in a grim and visually confrontational manner. Henry himself put the noose around Bardolph’s neck –again, there is no legitimation in the text for this action– as he briefly kissed Bardolph on the forehead. As Montjoy, the French Herald, entered and Henry discussed the troubling state of his army, Bardolph was all the while standing there with the noose around his neck, fully ignored by the king. Finally, as Henry and his troops marched off, and the king spoke the words “We are in God’s hand, brothers, not in theirs” (3.6.169), he marched past Bardolph, without so much as giving him a glance. Next, Bardolph was hung onstage to the sound of war drums, and allowed to dangle for a while at the end of the rope, as Pistol and the Boy looked on, crying. The horrible image, the visible act of hanging onstage, the negligence of Bardolph by Henry,

the contrast between his brief kiss and the crying of Pistol and the Boy, could not but leave a bad taste in the mouth. Rather than a king anguished by his harsh, but inevitable decision, this scene revealed a king feeling hardly any emotions at all regarding Bardolph. This approach was continued in the scene where Henry ordered the killing of the prisoners: not cut from this production –as in most previous Stratford productions–, his order to kill the prisoners was spoken without any elusive or multi-faceted emotions. Onstage, even his own soldiers regarded Henry in disbelief as he gave this ultimate order of horror, and the ambiguity –the co-existence of the rabbit and the duck– which McAnuff was aiming for, seemed to have disappeared.

The final scene of the production held, however, an ultimate and unexpected surprise for the audience, which was –interestingly– specifically linked to the Canadian context of this production. That this production took place in Canada was already noticeable in the audience’s reaction at several moments. For example, the text holds many lines of the French, which refer to the English character –such as the Constable of France’s remark “Is not their climate foggy, raw, and dull” (3.5.16). Lines like these will invariably draw a loud laugh from an English audience, whereas in the Canadian context they passed by without specific notice. The bilingual background in Canada was also noticeable, particularly in scene 3.4, where Princess Catherine tried to learn English from her attendant Alice. The largely French text of this scene remained fully intact, and not only the English mispronunciation, but also the English mistranslation and the French lines themselves drew much laughter from an audience which obviously understood the French lines.

The French-English nature of Canada, however, permeated the production on more than just a lingual level, and the possible relation between *Henry V* and Canadian identity literally stared the audience in the face as a huge Canadian national flag, the Maple Leaf, was unexpectedly unfurled at the end of the production –during the round of applause. The Canadian flag formed the finale to the presence of two other huge flags –St. George’s Cross and a variant of the French medieval flag with the fleurs-de-lis– which were alternately used to symbolize the English and the French court throughout the production. In itself, the presence of St. George’s Cross and the fleurs-de-lis are quite common in, for example, English productions of this play. However, these two flags carry special meaning not just within Canadian history, but within the Canadian context to this day. In fact, the national flag of Canada –the aforementioned Maple Leaf– was officially not adopted until 1965, when it replaced the United Kingdom Union Flag, and the Arms of Canada features both the Maple Leaf, the Union Jack, and the gold fleurs-de-lis. The first flag used in the development of Canada was St George’s Cross –carried by John Cabot who reached North America at the end of the fifteenth century–, whereas the second flag used –from 1534 onwards– was the Royal flag of France. This flag –with its fleurs-de-lis on

a blue background— was the official flag until the fall of Quebec and the cession of Canada to the United Kingdom in the early 1760s, when it was replaced by the British flag. While the Maple Leaf is now the official flag of Canada, the province of Alberta still features St. George's Cross in its flag, St George's Day is a holiday in Newfoundland and Labrador, and many other provinces feature the Union Jack—which incorporates St. George's Cross—in their flags. On the other hand, the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec features three fleurs-de-lis in its flag. Debates on Quebec's independence from Canada to this day play an important role in Canadian politics and the choice of flag features prominently in this debate. Quite recently, in September 2012, as the Parti Quebecois—who favors the independence of Quebec—took their oaths of office in the assembly, the Canadian flag was taken down from its spot in the Quebec legislature leaving the Quebec Fleur-de-lis once more standing alone. And during a festive ceremony in this chamber, Quebec's premier elect Pauline Marois stated that when "a people rediscovers its pride and its confidence nothing, absolutely nothing, becomes impossible for it."

With the continuing dispute surrounding Quebec and the French-English background of Canada, was the raising of the Maple Leaf at the end of this production meant to be a statement of support for Canadian unity—implicitly criticizing wishes for Quebec's independence? As the Maple Leaf was introduced as the official Canadian flag in 1965, the Speaker of the Senate stated that this flag was "the symbol of the nation's unity, for it, beyond any doubt, represents all the citizens of Canada without distinction of race, language, belief or opinion." And the Maple Leaf was unfurled in this production briefly after the peace treaty between the kingdoms and King Charles's wish that "France and England, whose very shores look pale / With envy of each other's happiness, / May cease their hatred" (5.2.345-47). However, if the Maple Leaf was meant to support that sense of unity, it would be an odd and ambivalent statement. While it is true that the Maple Leaf featured in the conclusion of the play in which France and England became united, the two countries did so only under the pressure of war, under a king heavily criticized in this production, after a ruthless campaign, and—as the Chorus indicated at the end of the play—in a situation where France would soon regain its independence. Was then the raising of the Maple Leaf a veiled criticism on the forced identity of a nation which is still coming to terms with its French-English colonial background? Was it an indication of the old enmity between England and France continuing its life across the Atlantic Ocean? Or was the raising of the Maple Leaf, at the very moment that the audience had started applauding, a criticism of nationalistic feelings in general, with the spectators finding themselves in the awkward position that they wanted to applaud a production, but instead found themselves applauding the Canadian flag? It would have been interesting to have seen this production on the stage of Quebec, rather than in Ontario, where one may

wonder at the success of this possible statement, as the applause in no way diminished after the Maple Leaf was raised. All in all, although the production itself could have exploited ambiguity in a more complex way, the ending to McAnnuf's Canadian production was a stunning visual climax, as unsettling and ambivalent an ending to *Henry V* as I have ever seen –and one very relevant to the Canadian context.

Julius Caesar: Shakespeare's Africa Play?

The concept behind the 2012 *Julius Caesar* –directed by Gregory Doran– promised a Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production that would be different from any previous production of the RSC. For one thing, the RSC abandoned its traditional preference for colour-blind casting, and Doran consciously chose an all-black cast of British actors –the first time ever in the history of the RSC. Also, the play was not set in the traditional Roman environment, but rather in an unnamed, modern, sub-Saharan country, and finally *Julius Caesar* was advertised very strongly by the RSC as Shakespeare's "Africa play", therewith seemingly legitimising its choice of an all-black cast.

The strong connection between *Julius Caesar* and Africa is not new in itself, and it seems that the play is the most often performed on the African stage. Famous African leaders have had strong feelings and ties to the play: for example, Julius Nyerere –the first president of Tanzania– translated both *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into Swahili, while Nelson Mandela annotated his version of *Julius Caesar* while he was at Robben Island. Dictatorship, the seizing of power in bloody coups, the assassinations, regime changes, the chaos and power vacua were themes that rung strongly in post-colonial Africa, and in many interviews and reviews of this production of *Julius Caesar* references to African leaders such as Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko, Robert Mugabe, and Bokassa frequently appeared.

Using the African background also helped Doran in solving one of the traditional problems of *Julius Caesar*, the difficulty of keeping the audience's attention in the final two acts, after the climax of Caesar's assassination and Mark Antony's speech near the end of Act 3. For Doran, the events in Libya revealed that the main questions of the play lay not so much in the first three acts, but in the final acts: "Watching the Arab Spring unfold, the question was not, whether they were going to get rid of Gadaffi, the question was, what happens next. In Libya, Tunisia, in Syria. What happens next? That gave us a different focus to the play." With the focus not just on the build-up, but also on the aftermath of the coup, and without the usual interval –often after the third act–, the final hour of the play was much more dynamic and urgent than any I have ever seen, not merely in the fast-paced battle scenes, but also in the sense

of misplaced idealism, disillusion, cruelty, power struggle, and loss that pervaded these scenes.

So, is *Julius Caesar* –as the RSC leaflet stated– Shakespeare’s “Africa play”? It is a silly question. For one thing, plays such as *The Tempest* –with its strong postcolonial tradition– or *Macbeth* –with its witches and power struggles, and incidentally also lauded by Mandela and translated into Zulu– would be plays that might compete with *Julius Caesar* on the question of Shakespeare’s Africa play. Perhaps even more important, with the modernistic notion of a nation-state under attack, the even larger notion of an Africa itself is in question: it suggests homogeneity in a huge continent, which simply is not there. Also, the political resonances of the production were not just sub-Saharan, but also Arab African –originating as it did in the Arab Spring in Libya–, Arab Peninsular –when a huge statue of Caesar was pulled down the reference to Saddam Hussein’s statue was unmistakable–, and Eastern European –as in Romania’s Ceausescu, or in the ensuing horrors after the breaking up of Yugoslavia. However, even if there were such a thing as Shakespeare’s Africa play, one may wonder in how far a production performed by a group of black British actors, on a British stage, for a –predominantly white– British audience, in the British language, in a small British village, within the framework and dictates of the British theatre system, can ever be an Africa play. Context is by far the most important element that defines any given theatre production, context defines the interaction taking place between audience and actors, and this was very much a British context.

Doran himself readily acknowledged this and although he referred to the South African actor John Kani’s argument that *Julius Caesar* was Shakespeare’s most African play, he also argued his *Caesar* was not so much “a black production, [but ...] a version of *Julius Caesar* set in a particular way, and therefore it requires black actors, and that’s a distinct difference.” Doran’s production was indeed set in some unnamed country in sub-Saharan Africa, was played by black actors, with African costumes, to the accompaniment of African music, played by an afro beat group calling themselves the Vibes of March. The production replaced the soothsayer by a more African kind of shaman, like a witch doctor –played by Theo Ogun-dipe–, who was ever present throughout the production, not just during the soothsayer moments, but also during pivotal moments, such as Caesar’s death, Mark Antony’s speech, or Cassius and Brutus’s argument. Rather than a mere soothsayer, he turned into a powerful agent of magical force evoking the powers of spirits, but at the same time powerless to stop the tide of war, attrition, revenge and struggle, and –in the end– thoroughly saddened by it. The African set of Doran firmly placed this *Julius Caesar* in Africa, and there were strong resonances with African dictators, with the kids soldiers –as in Brutus’s young servant Lucius who turned into a boy soldier–, with the ensuing massacres, as in Rwanda, for example –horribly

illustrated by the tearing up of the innocent poet Cinna by a mob out of control–, and even with the instruments of violence, as in the use of a tyre and petrol ‘necklace’ against the same Cinna, a technique which was also used against enemies by ANC supporters in South Africa.

The African set and the black actors that Doran used for this production did indeed provide a new angle on *Julius Caesar*, but it was not in this political arena that the true value or new insights of the production lay. Interesting though the references to another continent were, they were also straightforward, and generally confirmed the newspaper reports that filter down from Africa into western media. As such they rather supported western stereotypical images of African post-colonial rule and turmoil, rather than complicating them. On a strictly political level, while interesting, the play did not immediately offer any new or surprising insights into Africa. Rather, it was on the personal dimension of *Julius Caesar* that this production truly made a difference.

Julius Caesar is more than a political thriller, it is also a deeply personal play about human beings struggling with relationships, friendships, ambitions, and it was on this level that the production excelled. For example, the relation between Brutus and Cassius –played by Paterson Joseph and Cyril Nri– was played in this production with a strength of emotion rarely seen on stage. The yearning for friendship in Cassius beneath his political unscrupulousness, and the harshness and darkness in Brutus beneath the naïve idealism and loyalty came to a mesmerising and intimate confrontation in the tent of Brutus, as Cassius asked Brutus to kill him by baring his chest to him. These were first and foremost men of flesh and blood –men with whom we could sympathize–, rather than politicians, and Cassius’s death was mourned in the production with a strong sense of personal loss. The complexity of character in Brutus was illustrated perfectly in his final scene, as he was about to commit suicide. It was a scene gradually building up towards a powerful emotional suicide with powerful words, when, just before the final act of suicide, the boy Lucius –in total discrepancy– snored loudly in the background. The snore caused Brutus – and the audience– to laugh at this moment of high drama, as Brutus was about to kill himself, a laughter that did not express cynicism or harshness, but rather appreciated the humour of the moment. This laughter did not stop Brutus from ending his life –too much had happened for that–, but it painted a powerful picture of a man able to laugh and enjoy himself, even though he was about to commit suicide. It was a touching and deeply personal moment, bringing Brutus close to the audience, with whom he shared his laughter.

If anything, this production was not about the political, it was about the personal and it was on this level that we were reminded of the universality of emotions in Shakespeare, in spite of the African setting of the production. This *Julius Caesar* did not so much remind us of any differences between Africa and Europe, or the supposed fact that *Caesar* would be Shakespeare’s Africa play.

Rather –through the personal– it reminded us of the similarity between Africa and Europe. Political systems may differ, but on a personal level we are much closer. When President Daniel Arap Moi insisted that Shakespeare remain on the curriculum in Kenya, it was not because his plays were African, but because he considered them universal. When former prisoners from Robben Island stated that Shakespeare was their guiding text, it was not because he was typically African, but because the plays reminded them that they were part of a universal drama. When Mandela praised Shakespeare, it was not because he was African, but because he reminded him that the world was a very small place.

Ten years ago, I interviewed someone from Surinam, a former Dutch colony, for a book I was writing on the Dutch multicultural society and the stereotyping between different ethnic groups. He told me: “Coen, the moment I, the black guy, am no longer someone on television, or someone in the distance, the moment I become not just your neighbour, or someone you see in the supermarket, but your friend, that is the moment when stereotypes may start to break down, that is the moment when you discover the personal behind the stereotypical image and that will also influence your perception of others like me.” And I suppose that is one of the major achievements of this *Julius Caesar*: not the African setting, no matter how interesting or refreshing, not the political, but the personal. When in the end Brutus and Cassius turned into potential friends, became our friends, came close to us, really close –in spite of the African setting–, that was the moment you were confronted with the universality of emotions behind the particular setting and the stereotypes of colour and country. And that, indeed, was no mean feat of this production.



1. *Henry V*. From left: Timothy D. Stickney as Duke of Exeter, David Collins as Bishop of Ely, Aaron Krohn as King Henry V, James Blendick as Archbishop of Canterbury, Tyrone Savage as Duke of Gloucester and Stephen Russell as the Earl of Westmorland. (Photograph by David Hou.)



2. *Julius Caesar*. Theo Ogundipe as the Soothsayer. (Photograph by Kwame Lestrade.)

***A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Adapted and dir. Georgina Kakoudaki. Theatre groups Ω2 and 4Frontal, Teatro tou Neou Kosmou, Greece.**

***Julius Caesar: Scripta Femina*. Dir. Roubini Moschochoriti. Theatre group Anima Kinitiras Studio, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou*

The *Dream* and *Caesar* on a bare stage

The Athenian theatre season of 2012-2013 offered a couple of fresh productions based on Shakespearean plays, namely a *Midsummer Night's Dream* for adolescents and a show based partly on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, directed by Georgina Kakoudaki and Roubini Moschochoriti respectively, both of them belonging to a generation of talented artists that are now around forty.

Roubini Moschochoriti, with her theatre group Anima, created a production under the title *Julius Caesar: Scripta Femina*. The text was inspired by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, but was also based on Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*, Alexandre Dumas's *Julius Caesar* and Valerio Massimo Manfredi's *The Ides of March*. Focusing on Julius Caesar's last days, the show presented his story as told by three women that shared or followed closely his personal and political course: his wife Calpurnia, Brutus's wife Porcia, and Brutus's mother, and Caesar's lover, Servilia.

Although Moschochoriti's production was only partly based on Shakespeare's play, it is still worth mentioning. The members of Anima carefully selected the excerpts that formed the final text in a way that revealed the women's part in Caesar's story. As Moschochoriti explains in her director's note in the programme, the production "explores how a woman feels living next to a powerful man, how she adopts his way of life, how she is affected by his choices, how she deals differently with relationship and marriage, but above all how she handles her husband's involvement with issues of power".

On the bare stage of Kinitiras Studio, Olga Nikolaidou (Calpurnia), Stella Nouli (Porcia) and Vassiliki Tsekoura (Servilia) told the story of Julius Caesar using only a minimum of props (such as Caesar's oversized head, Brutus's torso, or a box containing Caesar's letters and gifts, respectively) to underscore an excellent performance.

Georgina Kakoudaki, the director of the Department of Adolescent Theatre of the theatre group 4Frontal, is one of the few directors in Greece who work on theatre for adolescents. However, her productions are enjoyable for all audiences, regardless of age. After staging *The Birds* by Aristophanes, Kakoudaki took up one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies (this season the

Dream was also staged by Michail Marmarinos for the Greek National Theatre). For Kakoudaki, the two plays are related, since they both deal with utopia, proposing different ways of escaping from reality, as she explains in the director's note in the programme of the *Dream*.

Kakoudaki's *Dream* begins with five young mechanicals of our time (played by five young actors, all members of the theatre group Ω2) facing a disaster: the van that contains the paraphernalia for their production (set, costumes, lights etc.) is unable to reach them in time, which means that they'll have to perform their play in the clothes they're wearing, using only a few musical instruments they carry with them –or objects that can be used to produce music (including a set of wrenches).

After sharing with the audience the story of the whole play, the actors are then transformed into fairies (Puck and his fellows), merely by pulling the hoods of their jackets on their heads, and by playing their musical instruments. When Puck mentions Hermia and Lysander, two of the fairies become the young couple merely by removing their hoods from their heads, and the same happens with the other two fairies when Puck mentions Helena and Demetrius. The same also happens with the parts of Titania and Oberon; the former, who represents the power of the Day, wears a necklace featuring a large sun (this is the prop by which the actress who plays Titania –played by two different actresses in different parts of the production– transforms herself into the fairy Queen), and the latter, who represents the power of the Night, wears a pair of black wristbands with silver thread in the weaving (and this is how we recognize the two different Oberons). Throughout the production the actors consecutively become trees in the forest where the lovers take refuge, the ass into which Bottom is transformed, or whatever is mentioned in the play, displaying in the most creative way that theatre merely needs a bare stage and the body of an actor –a fact that was so aptly reminded in the middle of Greece's financial crisis.

Once more creating a production for adolescents, Kakoudaki inserted various elements to bring the play closer to their reality. Considering the youngsters' characteristic interest in music, she used well-known Greek songs, both old and new (mostly love songs), which the lovers exchanged instead of their lines, and, to make things even more familiar with the adolescent audience, she often made the characters speak in a rap-like rhythm. The director also introduced global problems of the modern era, which she related to her characters' activities. For example, among other things, Puck had to take care of a series of issues, such as the ozone hole (which he had to close), or a meteorite rain (which he had to prevent from falling onto the Earth) etc. Also taking into account the youngsters' commonly raw sense of humour, Kakoudaki enhanced the comic effect with extra touches here and there; for example, Puck had supposedly eaten the flower whose juice he was supposed to apply on both the

lovers' and Titania's eyes, and so he had to spit on them for the flower's juice to take effect.

However, this *Dream* was not created merely to entertain a young audience; it was also meant to make this audience explore the timeless issues found in the play. Hero Potamoussi, in her note in the programme as the director's collaborator on the paedagogic part of the production, explains how they work with the material they provide to the pupils after the show is presented in schools: The production is used as a motive for thought and discussion regarding "relationships, stereotypes, possibilities, certainties and uncertainties". The pupils can then "decode and process elements of the production related with these issues and finally rebuild the concepts they have processed from their own point of view into a piece of work that bears their own mark".

Kakoudaki's production was overall an excellent groupwork. Her actors (Stavros Yannouladis, Apostolos Koutsianikoulis, Eleni Koutsoumba, Gregoris Liakopoulos, Aristeia Stafilaraki) handled with ease their consecutive transformations, and tirelessly filled the bare stage of Theatro tou Neou Kosmou with their youthful energy. The whole production underlined the idea of dreaming, and more references to dreams were added to the text. Furthermore, Kakoudaki managed to convey what she saw in Shakespeare's play, which she describes in the director's note as "the beautiful message about politics and the human condition that the Renaissance offered to the following centuries: everything is possible".



1. The group as fairies. (Photograph by Marianna Verigaki).



2. The group as mechanicals. (Photograph by Marianna Verigaki).